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Campus Report June 21, 2007

06.21.2007 | Campus and Community, Faculty Homily for Mass of Christian Burial for Larry Hadley

Immaculate Conception Chapel, University of Dayton

June 15, 2007

Given by Father Chris Wittmann, S.M.

Readings:

Wisdom 3:1-6,9

Psalm 103 (The Lord is kind and merciful)

1 John 3:1-2

John 6:37-40

Linda, Mark, Eric, and Alena, our deepest condolences and prayers are with you. To Larry's family: his brother and sisters and in-laws, his nieces and nephews, as well as his friends and colleagues, please accept the sympathies of the University of Dayton community. Our prayers are with you. We would like to give a special welcome to those of you who have traveled great distances to be here, and especially to those who come from different faith traditions. We know that Larry's own family is sort of "aggressively ecumenical," representing a range of Christian perspectives. We also welcome those of other faith traditions, as we recognize that Larry's friends and colleagues span a number of faith traditions. We are grateful that you are all here with us as we pray for Larry, for his family, and indeed for ourselves.

The homily at a Catholic funeral is supposed to be something other than a straight eulogy which simply praises the deceased person. Unfortunately, a person like Larry makes this very difficult, because there are so many good things worth saying about him. I did not know Larry, but I have learned a lot about him this past week, and it is clear that he was an exceptionally good person, about whom many good things can be said.

In fact, there are a lot of things about Larry's illness these past few years, and his early death, that might cause us to say: "It's not supposed to end this way." A man full of life, intellectual curiosity and creativity, with way too much enthusiasm and energy to retire yet, whose life is cut short by a debilitating disease when he is barely into his sixties. Larry was a remarkably unselfish scholar who spawned many of his colleague's papers in casual conversations at conferences or in parking lots. He was a talented teacher who made significant, creative and lasting contributions to his field, and who had a similarly significant, creative and lasting influence on the lives of people around him: his family, his friends, his colleagues, his students, and of late, his care-givers. A person so good and so well-loved should not be taken from us so early. Larry was a wonderful son and brother, father and uncle, neighbor and friend. He was a fun-loving prankster, a vigorous, athletic man, a runner and a basketball player who, his family leads me to believe, would want you to know, even at his funeral (if he has failed to tell you himself) that he played basketball at Rutgers on the same team with Jimmy Valvano. And (listen closely to Larry's carefully chosen words) he was "once on the same court as Bill Bradley." For such a fun-loving, vigorous, athletic man, who was also a gifted communicator, to be stricken with a disease which gradually took away his physical abilities, to the point that it was difficult to understand his speech at the end, this was a particularly difficult cross for Larry to bear, and it is for us, too. Like Larry, we might agonize over this irony, and find ourselves in turmoil as we struggle to make sense of that which does not make sense, but rather is truly tragic because it doesn't. We might search in vain, as Larry did, for the reason behind his illness. If we find ourselves tormented by trying to make sense of the reality of Larry's affliction, we are in good company. First of all, we are in Larry's company, and I believe that all who knew him will testify that Larry's company was singularly good company to be in. But we are also in the company of those people that the first reading calls foolish because they search in vain for hard logic behind cold tragedy; because they consider the souls of the just to be dead, their passing to be an affliction. If we can't make sense of Larry's death, and if we say: "It is not supposed to end this way," at least we are in good company.

On the other hand, some of the things that Larry's family has told me about the last months of Larry's life make me want to say:

"Well, if it has to end this way, Larry surely made the best of it." When Larry became sick, his goal was to out-live his parents and mother-in-law. Later, as his condition worsened, he said he wanted to live to his 62nd birthday. He did not out-live his parents, but he did out-live his mother in law, to whom he had grown close in her own frail health. Linda's mother passed away three weeks ago. Although Larry was tormented by his own condition, he continued to be a source of love, wisdom, and compassion for those around him. Growing up as the eldest son of an American Baptist minister, Larry knew that his father was criticized anytime Larry went to a school dance. These preacher's kids were allowed to play cards at home, but not allowed to tell anyone that they played cards at home. Perhaps because of this, Larry was never judgmental, but always invited people to see things from the other person's point of view, or simply to have compassion on that person. His wisdom, compassion and understanding showed through to the end. He befriended Kelly, one of his care-givers, and her young son. Not long ago, he advised Alena to have patience with someone she was frustrated with.

Linda told me that last Friday was a particularly beautiful day for Larry. He had been reminding her for days to be ready early before she left for work, so that she and Larry could enjoy a special breakfast with Kelly, who prepared it and made sure to include sweets, which Larry claimed he didn't like, fooling no one. Other family members began to arrive later in the day and it was determined that the celebration should not wait, so Larry's favorite meal, lobster from Jay's, was brought carry-out style to their home. The meal, and the conversation that evening, both of which Larry relished, were seasoned heavily with stories and laughter, including one very funny story which is apparently still too risqué to share with a visiting priest a week later. That night, Larry fell asleep soundly. And that night, he died in his sleep, with a peaceful expression on his face, after a wonderful day with family and friends, lobster and laughter. It was early on the morning of his 62nd birthday.

And today, the day on which Larry is buried, happens to be the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, one of those rare weekdays solemnities that only comes around once a year; a feast which focuses our attention in a special way on the compassionate mercy of God which comes to us through the love of Jesus; a solemnity on which the only Mass permitted besides the Mass of the Sacred Heart, is a funeral Mass. If it has to end this way, Larry sure made the best of it, probably with some help from God.

But in truth, what we celebrate today, with readings carefully and lovingly chosen by Linda, Alena, and Karen, is not whether or not it is supposed to end this way. What we celebrate is our faith that, this way or not, this is not the end. It is not the end for Larry, and it is certainly not the end for our relationship of love with Larry. It is only the foolish in the passage from Wisdom who consider death to be the end (and maybe those who take themselves too seriously and aren't able to trust the foolishness of God.) For the souls of the just are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them, just as Larry's torment has now ended, he being now in the hand of God. Their death appears utter destruction, but they are at peace, much as Larry died. God has tried them, and found them worthy. Larry, a golden person to his family and friends, has been gold in God's furnace, tested, proved, purified, found worthy, now at peace beyond what we can imagine. Those who trust God shall understand (or perhaps believe even when we don't understand) and the faithful (Lord, in your mercy, include us among your faithful) the faithful shall abide with God in love; because grace and mercy are with his holy ones and God's care is with his elect. For as our psalm says: the Lord is kind and merciful, and God's kindness and justice extends to children's children.

Larry, a true child of God and a playful lover of all children, starting with his own children, reflects to us the love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. And while we are God's children now, what we and Larry shall be has not yet been revealed, for we shall be like God, and see God as God is. And we shall be with Larry again one day, because this is not the end.

From what I have heard and read, Larry lived all of his life as if this is not the end, as if death is not the end. It is the best way to go about living this life. It is also the best way to die. About three weeks ago, Larry said: "Someday I will walk again." And I suspect that Larry would be the first to give credit not to himself, but to the grace and mercy of God which gave him faith, which raised him up, and helped him live such a loving life; a life in which he so readily raised others hopes and dreams even right up to his own death.

Let us listen again to the words of today's gospel. We might recognize in them some of Larry's traits, which would again be a reflection of God's love in him, the result of God's grace at work in Larry's life. In the midst of our grief, which is real and will only fade very slowly, with time, let us pray that we might believe more deeply that death is not the end. Let us pray that we might live our lives out of the strong conviction that God loves us even in our suffering and sin; that our lives might also reflect the love of God that comes to us, and to Larry, in these words of Jesus:

"Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of the one who sent me. And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it on the last day. For this is the will of my Father: that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him on the last day."